

Dominion Telegraph: Lifeline Through the West

Manning the Dominion Telegraph line on the prairies of the 1870s and 80s, noted the oldtimer, was not "cakes and ale". It was coping with sporadic lack of food and fuel, fearful isolation, Métis and Indians hostile in the face of encroachment on their lands. Mud and floods in spring, plagues of mosquitoes in summer, and marrow-chilling cold in winter.

This summer the Humboldt, Saskatchewan location which once served as a western hub of the telegraph line was marked as a national historic site, paying tribute to the communication pioneers who built and maintained the line and underlining the importance of the telegraph system as first tenuous tie between east and west of the infant Dominion.

By the early 1870s Confederation was a fact, and the new government was at once faced with settling the northwest as well as completing a communications link with British settlements west of the Rocky Mountains. Their first step was to dispatch a force of 500 men to police the northwest. These North West Mounted Police, few in numbers for the territory they had to cover, emphasized the immediately necessary for quick message transmission and in 1874 construction of the Dominion Telegraph was begun.

When completed in 1878, the telegraph line stretched through 1,300 miles of wilderness along the proposed route for the Canadian Pacific Railway from Manitoba to British Columbia: from Selkirk to Winnipeg, westward near present-day Pelly, crossing the South Saskatchewan River at Clark's Crossing 18 miles below Saskatoon, skirting the elbow of the North Saskatchewan River, and thence from Battleford to Edmonton and the Yellowhead Pass.

To keep the line in working condition was a continuous struggle against animals and

the elements. On the plains, buffalo were turned the poles by using them as scratching posts. In wet weather the wire lost so much current passing through uncut leafy groves that it was sometimes impossible to telegraph any considerable distance.

The linemen were stationed at 100-mile distances and travelled over bridgeless and sometimes impassable trails by single-horse backboard in summer and homemade sled in winter. The linemen's "beat" west of Humboldt passed through the desolate Salt Plain, especially forbidding in winter. Often the crusty snow cut the horses' legs so badly that they had to be bandaged. Far from trading posts, linemen had little variety in their menus: bannock, tea, bacon and rolled oats were the staples. Often too, provisions would give out or were spoiled by rainwater coming through a leaky shack roof while the linemen was out doing repairs.

In those early days, the telegraph was a literal lifeline through the west. At the Battleford head office a medical book was kept handy and free medical advice was dispensed over the wire—the best that could be done when no doctor was available within a radius of hundreds of miles.

To fill the long prairie days and nights, the telegraph served a social function—as a medium for long-distance checker playing. Players at Battleford challenged those at Edmonton. Later when Qu'Appelle became eastern terminus of the line, local oldtimer Ace McLean dominated the checker circuit. For a time Battleford could produce no match for the ace until a young French-Canadian challenger was brought in. He could speak very little English but succeeded in pointing out the right moves for transmission against Ace at Qu'Appelle, and won every game until interest died out.

The North West Rebellion of 1885 brought action to the country between Battleford, Saskatchewan, and kept the wires buzzing. Clark's Crossing, at the southern point of a triangle formed by Duck Lake in the west and Battleford in the east, was the area telegraph station. J. S. Macdonald of Edmonton, an operator who ultimately rose to become General Inspector of the Government Telegraph Service, gave this account of the times.

"Life at Clark's Crossing during these days was full of interest, excitement and colour. Convoys of teams arriving with supplies, unloaded and returned to Fort Qu'Appelle; couriers from General Middleton came and went; newspaper correspondents, anxious to give their papers the latest and most sensational news, accepted the wildest rumours and telegraphed them as fact.

"As operator, I received many telegrams from people in the East praying for news of relatives who frequently were in another part of the country. Realizing their great anxiety, whenever there was a chance of obtaining information by personal enquiry or by telegraph, I did so and advised the relatives accordingly."

And then, as now, officials had the occasional run-in with the press, as former telegraph operator Macdonald relates: "Battleford was taken May 12th. Four days later, three Mounted Police Scouts, Hovell Armstrong and Diehl, happened upon Riel some three miles from General Middleton's Camp. He was quite willing, even anxious to surrender, but feared personal violence from the troops. The scouts however, reassured him, pointing out that he was unknown, and they at once conducted him to the General's tent without attracting attention from any quarter.

"That evening these same scouts arrived at Clark's Crossing with despatches from the General to the Minister of Militia, advising of Riel's capture and the ending of the Rebellion so far as this district was concerned. Hovell also brought instructions that under no circumstances were newspaper correspondents or others to make it known over the telegraph. It had been decided to take Riel to Ottawa for trial, and the General feared demonstrations en route if it were known Riel was on the train. However on the following day I was advised that Riel would be taken to Regina and the taboo regarding information was off.

"Shortly after the Scouts left the General's camp to come to the Crossing, it became known that Riel had been taken and the majority of the press correspondents hurried to the telegraph office to advise their various papers. I showed them the General's prohibition, and they all accepted the situation gracefully, with one exception. This man stormed and insisted I take his copy despite the General's veto. Finding threats of no avail, he went away and returned an hour later gleefully announcing he had secured a courier to carry his correspondence to Humboldt, the nearest telegraph office, some 60 miles east. I replied that I was much obliged for the information since I

would at once telegraph the operator not to send it—a contingency which evidently had not occurred to him. I believe he must have sent a second courier after the first as his material never reached Humboldt."

And then there were situations when a man had to depend on his imagination and personal resources. Macdonald describes one of his experiences:

"Late one evening a courier brought from headquarters a number of important telegrams, most of which contained instructions to various Commanding Officers regarding the movement of troops. I had barely started sending these when the wire ceased working. From the fact that a slight current came through I knew that the wire was on the ground.

"By five o'clock the following morning the lineman and I were on our way eastward, taking the despatches with us. After some 20 miles we came upon the wire lying on the ground for a distance of about 100 yards.

"To effect a circuit, it was necessary to find a moist place in which to ground the wire, but although we dug some distance or by telegraph, I did so and advised the relatives accordingly."

In this dilemma I, being bookish, remembered Gulliver's action at a critical time, and repeating the incident to Joe suggested he follow Gulliver's example. But Joe's sense of decorum was outraged, and he vehemently protested that he had not come from Montreal and risked his life a hundred times among savages to undertake tasks such as this.

"I then told him I would return in five minutes and if when I returned the wire was not working he should consider himself discharged, and he would have to get back to Montreal as best he could—which of course was sheer bluff. But on my return the wire was working clearly, and the 'ground' held long enough for me to get the despatches through to their destinations."

Financial control of the Dominion Telegraph was held by private contractors until 1882 when the line was transferred to the federal Department of Public Works. The telegraph proved to be an expensive operation yielding a mere \$50 per month against an expenditure of over \$600. Nevertheless, the line was maintained in continuous operation for nearly four decades. In 1923 private telegraph companies took over the service and the old system was abandoned.

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Conservation Group
Office of the Public Information Adviser
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K1A 0H4 Canada

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Defining an Architectural Heritage



Peter Bower and Maphilde Brousseau, researchers with the Canadian Inventory of Historic Buildings, examine photos of an 18th-century engraving showing Québec City buildings. This model is one of several used to train recording teams (generally university students and other non-specialists) to recognize and correctly identify structural features of historic buildings.

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National Historic Parks News

Government Publications

The Canadian Inventory of Historic Building News, number 4 was launched by the National Historic Sites Service in the summer of 1970 as a ten-year, three-phased survey of historic structures across the country. The program is now one-third the way through the first phase of recording exteriors of 100,000 buildings. Phase two, piloted this autumn, will record interiors of some 7,000 exceptional buildings selected from the results of phase one. A final phase will screen phase two results for those most outstanding architecturally and historically.

Architecture, like a folk song, is an expression of a people. Unlike a song, a building is a vulnerable thing that can be destroyed by a whim in the onslaught of "progress" while the song lives on.

When it is completed over the next decade, the Canadian Inventory of Historic Building will provide a lasting record of our historic structures, and the human circumstances which gave them form.

As a back-up to the structural survey, documentary research is being carried out to uncover the why and wherefore behind our architectural landscape. The shelf of Canadian architectural bibliography is short—no more than a dozen volumes. Yet when planning so extensive a structural recording program, a large amount of preliminary data is required. Which were the earliest settled areas of the specific town or province? Are the existing old buildings the earliest built there? Who, then, were the original settlers or town founders? When and from where did they come? This type of information helps to trace out the architectural haystack, indicating where to look and what to look for in the way of historic structures.

Peter Bower, research co-ordinator for the inventory, explains: "We're interested in finding out which people settled where, when and why. Obviously groups of people coming from Europe as immigrants or migrants from other parts of the country bring their ideas with them, and we have



distinctive examples are a Sikh temple near Abbotsford and large old French-Canadian homes near Maillardville.

Research will be focused not only on the larger urban centers but also on what one might call service communities—fishing villages along the Atlantic coast, farming communities and industrial towns—to determine and compare how their development was conditioned by circumstance and environment. And, in turn, the historians will study the expression of these factors through the community buildings.

Say, for example, two groups of Scots left their hometown for Canada at about the same historical period. Upon arrival, one group of families settled in Nova Scotia, the other pushed west to Manitoba. Quite likely the building materials would have differed in the Nova Scotia and Manitoba settlements—each adapted to local climate and geography, yet each exhibiting common architectural features drawn from the Old World.

One current study traces the growth of some 20 communities and districts in British Columbia's Fraser Valley prior to 1914 (the historical boundary for the inventory in the western provinces). Although the majority of permanent settlers have been of British ancestry, the discovery of gold on the Fraser River (and later north in the Cariboo) brought prospectors from the world over through the valley in the late 1850s, and a number of disenfranchised miners remained to settle there.

Between 1858 and 1914 Chinese, Japanese, Indian (Sikh) immigrants, and French Canadians from Québec arrived. The study suggests however, that since so many non-British immigrants first came as indentured workers their presence may not be widely reflected in architecture. The Fraser Valley is nevertheless rich in old buildings;



produced as academic theses, or regional studies like the series on prairie settlement edited by Mackintosh and Joerg. "But the maps of ethnic distribution are not specific enough. C. A. Dawson's book on the prairies is helpful as a scholarly work, yet is not precise enough for our purposes. At any rate, such works are few and far between on the scale we need them—that is why we have had to carry out our own research."

The information gleaned from this historical study will give depth and perspective to the structural data recorded as part of the continuing architectural inventory program. It will enable cities and communities to learn specifically what sort of old buildings they have and assess which are worth saving. The objective of the Canadian Inventory of Historic Building is not only to record the Canadian architectural heritage but to discover it. And thus to encourage its preservation.

Only scanty bits of information in the way of actual wearing apparel have survived at Louisbourg to indicate what was worn there. However, the few fragments of cloth archaeologists have unearthed illustrate the fabrics and type of weave that possibly characterized local dress—plain (as opposed to livil) weave, silk velvet, wool velvet, and fine woolen stockings.

The historical researchers at Louisbourg have produced a fuller picture by combining inventory accounts of the original garments with descriptions of the buttons, buckles and other perishables recovered from the ruins. Additional research was also carried out by designer Doyle in European archives and museum collections.

The costume workshop, tucked into the third floor attic of the governor's chateau, houses a special loom designed by Doyle.

An unusual old church building between Prince Rupert and Prince George, B.C. combines the simple features of the traditional log cabin with the sophistication of arched windows and doorway.

Dress-making: 18th-Century Louisbourg Style

As workers reconstruct the fortifications and buildings of 18th-century Louisbourg, a team of craftswomen are recreating the sort of fabrics and fashions once worn by the inhabitants.

Costume designer Robert Doyle, formerly with the Neptune Theatre in Halifax, was commissioned to set up shop at Fortress Louisbourg National Historic Park in Nova Scotia and train Florence MacIntyre and her staff of seamstresses in the art of creating 18th-century dress. When completed, the garments for both civilian and military, will cover the social gamut from the practical rough woollens of the scullery maid to the elegant silk brocades and velvets in the bourgeois lady's wardrobe.

Beginning this summer, "hostesses" in the governor's chateau and a number of female park guides will don the 18th-century-style garments. During this first season six serving maids and "ladies of fashion" have been outfitted.

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"So often historians have set down volume after volume pertaining to the aristocracy—the wealthy and well-to-do—when writing about costume of any period. Obviously the garments of these people, expensive and difficult to obtain, are most likely to be preserved. Sconer or later, they are included in inventories or records of the time, and ultimately they are likely to become part of museum collections.

On the other hand, the rough garments worn by the poorer classes were meant for comfort and, practically, often hand-me-downs. The clothes were worn until threadbare, leaving nothing for posterity. Most were cut up and incorporated into floor coverings and heavy blankets.

What is the real purpose of a program such as this? I suppose my driving force is fed by the already detailed work done on the chateau, its rooms and furnishings. This kind of care and workmanship dictated a little more than just a series of fancy dresses. To complement work done thus far, civil clothing that "belonged" to the reconstructed town of the Fortress of Louisbourg was required.

What has been done to date is geared to illustration of 18th-century life at Louisbourg, and it would seem an anachronism to produce anything not scrupulously accurate within the restoration program.

An understanding of how design, patterns, and ornaments originate and develop requires a thorough background in the history of design, ornament, interior decoration, furniture, textiles and related fields, from the ancient periods to the 20th century. In this case with special emphasis on the 18th century.

I taught our seamstress, Mrs. Greta Beaver, the rudiments of 18th-century clothing construction, and she proceeded to make the petticoats and hooped skirts essential to the type of garment worn during the period. Much of her work has to be done by hand—the style does not lend itself to machine sewing.

incorporating features of a modern Swedish loom and an 18th-century French loom. Constructed at the park, the loom can produce simple woolen cloth as well as complex 16-harness linen. Silk ribbon is woven on a small frame loom, also constructed at Louisbourg.

The sounds of sewing machines are conspicuously absent as hand-finishing, quilting and embroidery are carried out on delicate lawn and fine silks, wool and linen materials.

As is evident throughout the reconstruction of the fortress-town, meticulous attention is lavished on historical detail. Ladies' linen caps, made in the Louisbourg workshop, are adorned with original 18th-century French lace. Shoes, wigs, buckles, and buttons, which cannot be manufactured at the park, have been produced by London and New York firms which specialize in historical reproductions.

Jim How, head of interpretation at the national historic park, promises that the garments will form a superb and unique collection. How points out that the costumes will likely prove interesting to men as well as women because dressing, 18th-century-style, was so different from today.

"In the 18th century women literally built their outfits, layer upon layer. They wore linen undergarments, whalebone corsetry, and voluminous petticoats. Our models will have to learn how to sit, stand, walk and even breathe in the lightly-corseted costumes."

Further, designer Doyle points out that up to the early 18th century women's clothes were not cut strictly to pattern.

The material was cut, as economically as possible, in an approximate shape. It was then gathered or pleated to fit the individual's measurements—taken over a whalebone corset if necessary.

Miss Florence MacIntyre, head seamstress, puts the finishing touches to a whalebone corset for a guide's costume to be worn at the King's Bastion—part of the fortress fortifications.

If we were to create garments that would do justice to the research already done, I felt that I had to obtain corset fabrics. My studies took me to Paris, Lyon, and London to investigate various textile collections. The textiles were not available on the commercial market and this meant either having the material woven for us or establishing a weaving program for our own use."

Robert Doyle
Costume designer

The pattern of women's dress didn't change during the first half of the 18th century. The "style" was in the silk fabric itself, and these fashionable fabrics were changed seasonally. Hence museum specimens of these early 18th-century silks are dated not by their cut but by the pattern in the fabric.

"Cutting," says Doyle, "is an art. That's what makes modern French couturier fashion so fantastic. In old paintings ladies' dresses may look very elegant but the wrinkles are very much there indicating the crush of cutting during this period. Although clothing construction and tailoring improved greatly by the late 1700s, it was not until the late 1800s that cutting became scientifically systemized to the degree we know it today.

In our costume program we had to compromise. We've maintained the 18th-century line of the garments—keeping specific seams proportionally in place to achieve the straight and triangular shape dictated by the whalebone corset—while at the same time cutting the pattern to suit the bosom of the particular wearer."

Both Doyle and How are pleased to point out that the costuming program has provided the opportunity for a number of talented women in the modern town of Louisbourg adjacent to the park to acquire the skills of creating historical dress.

"We created a small industry of stocking knitters who could undertake the production of 18th-century-style stockings, made to suit our specifications. This has worked extremely well and 20 of these Louisbourg women are knitting all the stockings for the project," says Doyle.

The women who made the costumes will be wearing them as well, so they will be able to explain to curious visitors the whys and wherefores of every stitch of their garment.

